TRANSIT

A more efficient and improved transit system has an important role to play in reducing traffic congestion. However, transit should not be seen as an alternative to expanding road capacity in meeting the demand for additional mobility. Instead, improvements in the capacity and efficiency of transit and road systems are complementary elements of a comprehensive approach to relieving congestion and meeting long-term transportation and environmental goals.

TRANSIT

Background

Transit continues to play an important role in providing Americans with mobility, and future increases in transit ridership would help meet the nation's growing transportation needs. Today, the nation's public and private transit systems operate mostly in several niche markets. These key markets include commuting, particularly along heavily traveled routes in large urban areas, mobility for those who are either unable or cannot afford to travel in a private vehicle, and for institutional travel, such as school busing. Increasing transit's modest share of overall travel, however, remains a significant challenge and may require some changes in how it is currently operated.

The Myth

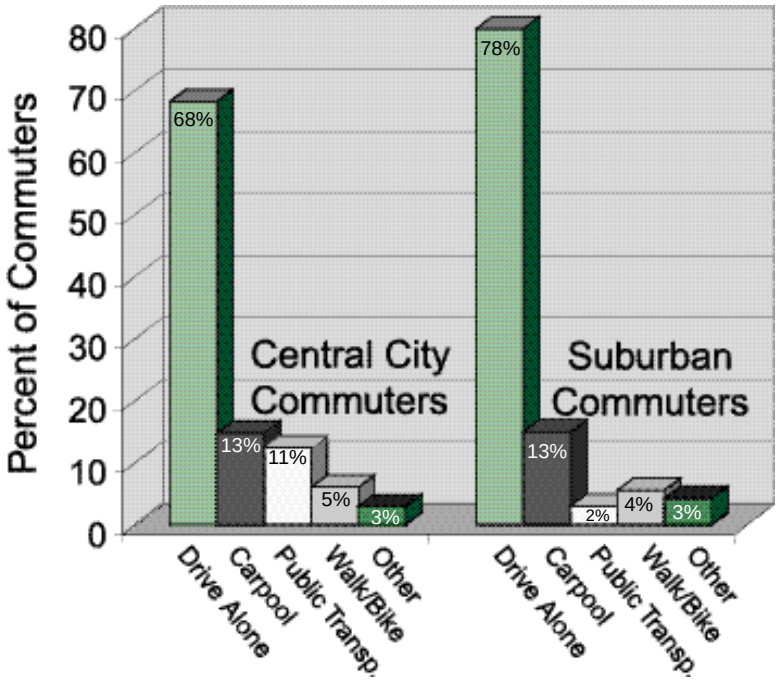
Increased ridership on public transit systems alone can meet the nation's additional future urban transportation needs and will reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality.

The Facts

Transit's share of travel has declined despite substantial public investments over the past 30 years.

- Transit ridership in the United States peaked during World War II and then declined significantly as increased car ownership and suburban growth reduced population in the urban core, according to the American Public Transit Association (1999). The continued dispersal of homes and jobs to the suburbs and outer suburbs based on growing incomes and a desire for additional space have reduced the competitiveness of transit with private vehicles. While 11 percent of workers in central cities commute by transit, only 2 percent of suburban workers commute by transit.
- In 1991, Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) which gave state and local governments unprecedented flexibility in using federal dollars, previously restricted largely to road and bridge projects, for public transit investments.

How America Gets to Work



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and *Commuting In America II*

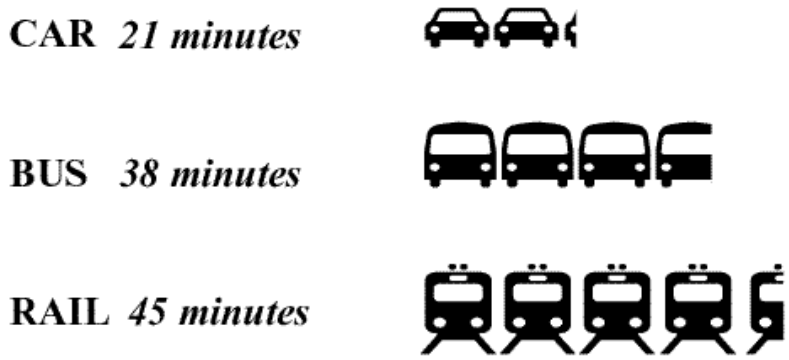
The additional federal funds have so far been unable to boost the share of travel on public transit. Between 1980 and 1995, the use of transit for commuting to work decreased from 6.3 percent to 3.5 percent with its overall share of travel standing at only 2.1 percent, according to a report by the Reason Foundation (1998).

- Time is a very precious commodity, especially to families. Most people prefer to commute in a private vehicle, because they wish to minimize travel time. The average commute by car is 21 minutes, by bus it is 38 minutes, and by rail it is 45 minutes, according to transportation analyst Alan Pisarski (1996), using data from the 1990 census.
- Many people, especially working mothers, make frequent stops on the way to and from work, to drop off and pick up children from school, to buy groceries, and run other errands. Trips like these require the flexibility of the personal automobile, since transit, especially rail transit, runs along fixed routes.

An emphasis on rail transit systems has not reduced urban traffic congestion.

- The availability of federal funds to pay for the construction of large urban transit projects has contributed to a resurgence of rail transit over the last 15 years. New systems have opened in Baltimore, Buffalo, Dallas, Denver, Miami, Portland, Sacramento, San Jose, and St. Louis.
- Despite this increase in funding and expansion of the system, there has been a decrease in transit's share of travel. In fact, Jonathan Richmond of Harvard University (1998) notes, "...with low ridership and most patrons drawn from bus transit, there is no case where new rail service has been shown to noticeably improve highway congestion or air quality."
- In the 1970s, officials in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area decided to limit road building and focus more resources on construction of a rail transit system and high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes. Today, despite remarkably high levels of transit use and carpooling, Washington has the second worst traffic congestion in the United States, according to the Texas Transportation Institute (1999).
- An analysis of recent U.S. urban transportation policy by the University of Texas (1999) concluded that regional governments "...generally erred by using disproportionate amounts of available subsidy dollars to construct and operate costly and ineffective rail transit systems instead of improving bus service and reducing fares."
- A much more affordable way to increase transit ridership is the construction of bus-only express lanes or HOV lanes. Research indicates that the overall costs per person-trip for bus-only lanes or HOV lanes is significantly lower than for rail transit expansions.

Average Commute Times For Various Travel Modes
(1996)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and *Commuting in America II*

Privately operated transit services may reduce costs and increase ridership.

- Despite the investment of $200 billion in government subsidies over the last 30 years, transit's share of national travel has decreased. This failure is partially the result of declining productivity corresponding to a shift from privately operated transit systems to public operation. In fact, public transit operating costs have increased four times faster than the rate of inflation over the last 30 years according to the Reason Public Policy Institute (1998).
- In 1955, only 3 percent of the nation's transit systems were publicly owned. Nevertheless, by 1980, 94 percent of all transit service provided in the United States was by government transit agencies, according to the University of Tezas study. Today, transit continues to be largely provided by government agencies, with only 10 percent of transit services nationwide contracted through competitive bidding. Studies show, however, that bus service provided by competitive services is significantly less costly than that provided by noncompetitive services.

Our Position

A more efficient and improved transit system has an important role to play in reducing traffic congestion. If we are truly going to reduce traffic congestion and improve the environment, however, transit improvements must be supplemented by additional capacity to our road system and better use of computerized traffic signals and other "smart-road" technologies.

Increasing future levels of transit usage will be an important objective of an overall strategy for meeting the nation's growing transportation needs, but higher transit use alone will not resolve our nation's growing traffic congestion problems. Attracting more riders to transit will require that transit service be better designed to meet the needs of potential riders. It must become more convenient and provide its patrons with increased personal safety if it is to meet the complex transportation needs of an increasingly suburbanized society.

Transit investment should be based on the type of service-rail, bus, demand—responsive, or van programs—that will offer the largest increase in mobility. Transit providers must also be allowed to provide their service at the most competitive cost possible while still providing appropriate service.

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Endnotes

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